

# Ten Policies for Raising Student Achievement



HENRY M. BRICKELL

Last spring a board of education asked me to suggest policies it might adopt to raise student achievement. I thought about what a policy is:

A policy is a guide for discretionary action adopted by a board of education to govern the work of the professional staff.

And then I thought about what a board of education could actually do to raise student achievement—other than hope and pray or hire a new superintendent. I tried to think of policies any board could adopt and seriously expect to work. They could be old policies I had borrowed, or they could be new ones I had to invent. But they would have to work.

Did I know any such policies? Even if I did, could I get them past the superintendent? Could I get them past the curriculum director? The principals? The teachers? And even if I did that, could I get the board to adopt them? Setting aside the practicalities, I wrote a list of 20. Here are 10 of them. The other 10 would be controversial.

**1. The board of education shall spend one-third of its time discussing curricular and instructional policy and student achievement.**

Note that the policy is *not* to spend one-third of its time listening to descriptions of the current program—an activity that often bores and sometimes puzzles members. No. This policy has the board standing at the forks in the curricular and instructional

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road one-third of its time, peering ahead at the student achievement destination it has adopted for itself, and debating whether turning left or turning right would cause students to reach that destination more surely, more quickly, more economically. The superintendent, of course, illuminates the roads ahead and advises on a choice. But, when the debating is done, the board turns the steering wheel. Then, having turned the wheel, the board takes the credit or the blame for the results. That is what it means to govern. (To administer is to drive down the road the board has turned onto.)

Standing at those forks in the road will keep any board awake—and responsible for curriculum, instruction, and student achievement. Moreover, it will remind the superintendent and all other administrators of the board's intense interest in raising student achievement. Finally, it will cause the administrative staff to think very hard about policy options, their pros and cons, and how to present them to the board. Nothing concentrates the administrative mind like the sight of board members' hands turning the steering wheel.

Will any board agree to spend one-third of its time this way? Most won't. Why not? Most boards unfortunately prefer to leave curricular and instructional matters to their administrators. And most administrators say encouragingly, "Leave the driving to us."

But a few boards will. The Richmond, Virginia, board decided to raise student achievement in elementary school English and mathematics from about the 45th to the 75th national percentile in the next six years. Then it spent about fifteen hours—a long, long time on a school board clock—in an intense debate over policy choices before adopting ten single-spaced

## Students will learn more if local boards set priorities, use test scores sensibly, and hold educators accountable.

pages of guides for discretionary action to tell the superintendent what roads to take to that destination. In the process, the board made both itself and its administrators nervous—just like any student driver. But now it can steer better. And it wants to keep its hands on the wheel.

### **2. Principals shall promise achievement test scores for their schools one year before the tests are given.**

There are several disadvantages to this policy:

- Principals will object strongly.
- Teachers will object more strongly.
- Newspapers may publish the projections and then embarrass the schools a year later if scores are lower than projected.

And there are several advantages:

- Principals will examine current test scores very closely, think hard about how much better they can do next year, and feel under pressure to deliver what they have promised.
- Principals will have heart-to-heart talks with their teachers about how much improvement they can realistically accomplish, and teachers will feel under pressure to accomplish what they project.

- Teachers will have heart-to-heart talks with their students about how much they can accomplish, and students will feel under pressure to accomplish what they discussed.

- Principals and teachers will check during the year to see whether learning is improving—when there is still time left to work harder and do more.

- The superintendent will promise the board that the principals and teachers will keep their promises.

- The board will promise the public.

The Savannah, Georgia, board carried out such a policy during the 1983-84 school year and enjoyed all of its advantages and disadvantages. Principals in about 45 schools graphed "promise lines" of CTBS score improvement a year ahead and got their faculties to endorse those promises a year ahead. The average promise was to raise average national percentiles by five points. In one year the result—not from this policy alone, but from several others as well—was an average rise in national percentiles of nine points, almost double what the principals had promised. Fifth graders tripled the promise in math by jumping (as the newspaper banner headline said, "quantum leaping") from the

**“The Valley View, Illinois, board had to confront this problem directly because its students, who were not learning much, could not learn any more—or so everybody said. In fact, they were getting dumber every year . . .”**

44th to the 59th national percentile. Savannah is following the same policy in 1984–85.

**3. Principals must pass every test administered in their schools.**

This is the modern Missouri Compromise. Let me explain. Once upon a time in Missouri I explained to school board members, “*Supervision* is the over-the-shoulder *prevention* of mistakes.” To be sure they did not mistake evaluation for supervision, I explained further, “*Evaluation* is finding mistakes *after* they are made.” The distinction disappointed the board members. They were hoping I would give them points on the *supervision* scoreboard for the annual *evaluation* visits their principals made to probationary teachers. But no. Evaluation is not supervision.

I explained something else: “You cannot supervise what you cannot do.” Now they knew that was true in their own lines of work—running a print shop, selling insurance, manufacturing paint, writing contracts, filling teeth—and they knew exactly why. No worker will accept corrections from a person who cannot actually do the job, and nobody who cannot do the job will offer such corrections—sensible behavior by both parties.

But the Missouri board members knew that principals are instructional leaders. And they thought this meant that principals can supervise what they cannot do at all—prevent mistakes by teachers in kindergarten pre-reading, grade 3 music, grade 5 art, grade 8 physical education, grade 10 world history, and grade 12 physics. The board members argued hard. I backed off and admitted that principals can supervise heat, light, ventilation, bulletin boards, and classroom discipline. Then the board members admitted that principals cannot prevent mistakes in *what* is taught and in *how* it is

taught unless they can teach it themselves. The board members had to admit what everybody else already knew perfectly well. As one board member said, “There is no supervision in the Missouri public schools.”

“Or anywhere else, either,” I said to console him.

He was not consoled. He continued, “We cannot hire principals in Missouri who can supervise their classrooms. Suggest a more reasonable expectation—something our principals can actually meet.”

I needed a lower standard for instructional leaders in Missouri—and everywhere else. But it could not be too low. Everybody knows how important the principal is. I needed to suggest a standard not too high but not too low. So I proposed the Missouri Compromise as a minimum standard for principals: principals must pass every test administered in their schools.

No school board has ever adopted this policy, as far as I know. After all, we have to fill the principalships because principals are important. Nevertheless, I am confident that student achievement will rise in schools where principals know as much as students.

**4. Classroom teachers shall be given inservice training in their subject fields more frequently than in teaching techniques.**

The opposite policy is followed in virtually all public schools, not as a result of reasoned debate of the alternatives by school boards and not even as a result of reasoned debate of the alternatives by school administrators. I propose this policy partly to provoke that missing debate.

I can think of three rational routes that might lead to the opposite policy: continuing their education by continuing their subject field courses. (And I

don't just mean for secondary teachers. Elementary teachers teach subjects, too—and probably need subject field inservice even more.)

- Administer college examinations to teachers both in their subject fields and in education. Provide inservice training where they score lowest.

- Have teachers observed by professors—professors of their subject fields and professors of education—to get prescriptions for their inservice training needs. Fill those where they are most deficient.

- Analyze the last five years of inservice training, and correct any imbalance between the subject fields and teaching techniques during the next five years.

My guess is that none of the three would lead to the present policy. All three would lead to the opposite policy.

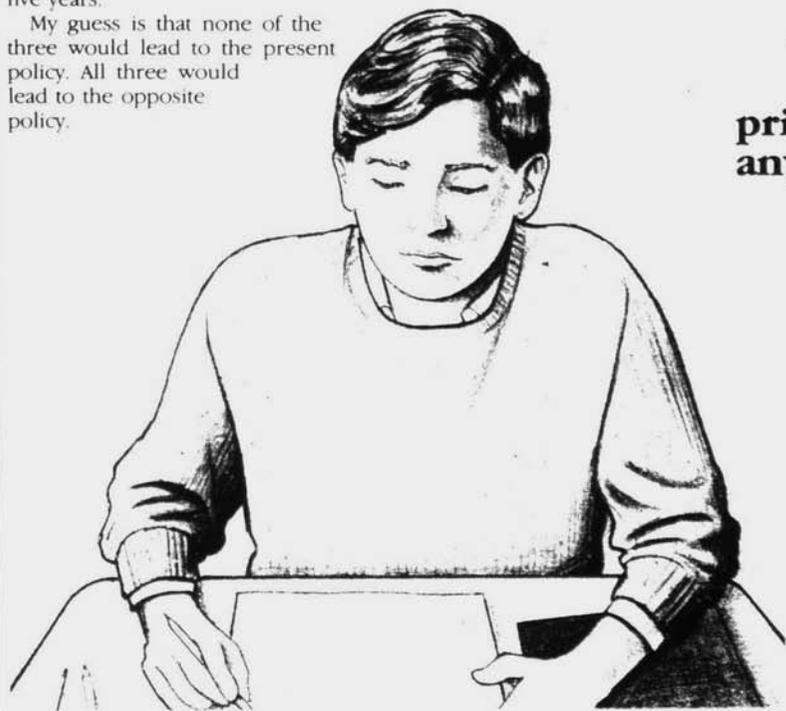
I have followed a fourth route to the opposite policy: several years of working with a large cross section of classroom teachers in various school districts who were writing objectives, lesson plans, and test questions for all subjects in all grades. My staff has read thousands of objectives, thousands of lesson plans, and some 25,000 test questions written by teachers. They have been studded with errors—errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation and errors in subject content. We have sat with committees of teachers who could not define *foresbadowing*,

identify *satire*, or give examples of *irony*, teachers who could not compute percentiles, multiply fractions, or balance equations.

We have handed out lesson plans for parents to use to teach their children, only to discover that teachers were using them to teach themselves their own subjects.

There is no reason to keep giving teachers inservice training on what they know best. Except inertia.

**5. Parents shall be given copies of the English and mathematics skills to be taught to their chil-**



**“It is no favor to teachers, students, principals, parents, or any other responsible party to be vague about the learning schedule.”**

**children in all grades K-12, along with instructions on how to teach each skill to their own children.**

The opposite policy is followed in most public schools, commonly based on several assumptions:

- Parents do not want to know in detail what their children are being taught.

- Parents cannot understand what their children are being taught.

- Parents will confuse their children by inept attempts to teach them.

- Parents will attack the schools when the schools fail to teach their children what has been scheduled.

All four assumptions are untrue and should be reversed, along with the policy they underpin. Most parents want to know, will understand, will teach their children sensibly whenever they try, and will share the blame when their children fail to learn.

Let me add four new assumptions:

- Parents will be favorably impressed with the amount, complexity, and importance of what the school is attempting to teach their children.

- Parents will admire the orderly stepladder of learning the school has built for their children to climb.

- Parents will urge their children to learn the skills and will check to see that they have.

- Parents will expect teachers to teach their children what has been scheduled.

The Cleveland, Ohio, board of education published nine handbooks for parents in the fall of 1983—one each for grades 1 through 9—titled *Reading at Home*. The books ran 40 to 75 pages, depending on the number and complexity of reading objectives at each grade. Every page held one reading objective; an explanation of the objective; concrete suggestions on how to teach it; and a question, usually

multiple choice, for testing it. Cleveland sent a copy to the parents of every child. Parental reaction ranged from silence to enthusiasm. No complaints. Teachers adopted the handbooks as teaching guides. "They are the hottest item in Cleveland. My set actually was stolen," one reading coordinator commented. The handbooks were out of print within a week. In retrospect, it looked like superb public—or parental—relations for Cleveland.

**6. No student learning objectives shall appear in two different grades.**

The opposite policy is followed in most public schools. In examining local curriculum guides, lists of objectives, textbooks, and classroom practices, this is what I find:

- *Gets the main idea* in grades 2, 3, 4, and 5.

- *Adds mixed fractions* in grades 4, 5, 6, and 7.

- *Knows what foreign cultures have contributed to life in the United States* in grades 5, 6, 7, and 8.

- *Understands the scientific method* in grades 7, 8, and 9.

- *Writes a well-structured paragraph* in grades 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12.

The objectives have been smeared over several grades, maybe by chance, but the practice is defended as if deliberate in every school where I have questioned it. The defenses:

- Students learn at different rates.

- Some students learn things in one grade, some in another.

- Students do not learn everything we teach.

- Students forget.

- Students have to get the main idea *whenever* they read.

- First we introduce; then we develop; then we master; then we elaborate; then we reinforce.

- Haven't you ever heard of a spiral curriculum?

- You don't know anything about learning and less about curriculum!

Here is how I have answered those defenses:

- I do too.

- A spiral goes *up* as well as around. Wheels go around—as in spinning wheels and in wheels spinning.

- A curriculum is a learning plan. When students do not learn according to plan, something is wrong—maybe the plan, maybe the teaching, maybe the studying.

**"Most parents want to know, will understand, will teach their children sensibly whenever they try, and will share the blame when their children fail to learn."**

● Break lumpy objectives like *understand the scientific method* into teachable pieces, and then assign each teachable piece to *one* grade. Here are some teachable pieces:

(a) Knows a hypothesis when she sees one.

(b) Separates relevant data from irrelevant data and applies only the first to her hypothesis.

(c) Smiles cheerfully and tells all her friends when her hypothesis proves dead wrong.

How would this policy be translated? A few suggestions follow.

Assign each objective to the one grade where *most* students—say 75 percent—can learn it—say grade 5. Teach it *earlier* to bright students in grade 3 and grade 4, but tell everybody—teachers, students, parents, the public—that it is 5th grade material. Teach it *later* to slower students—in grade 6, or grade 7, or even grade 8 if you have to—but tell everybody it is still 5th grade material. Tell 6th graders in September that they should already have learned the 5th grade material and that they are, of course, expected to *use* it in grade 6—and for the rest of their lives. Teach it repeatedly if you have to, year after year, to students who forget it—but tell everybody it is *still* 5th grade material. If most students cannot *learn and remember* it in grade 5, move it up to grade 6 or grade 7.

There can be no accountability without fixed responsibility. It is no favor to teachers, students, principals, parents, or any responsible party to be vague about the learning schedule. Not every student will keep up with the schedule—though most *will*—and it is important to figure out why and try to correct the problem. Without a learning schedule, there is no problem to correct.

## **“You cannot supervise what you cannot do.”**

The Bemidji, Minnesota, board of education adopted the one-objective-per-grade policy for *every* subject in grades kindergarten through 12. But that was only after 100 teachers on 14 curriculum committees fought tooth and nail against it. After they lost, the teachers did a superb job of building 14 stepladders with no overlapping rungs—the best set of 14 I have ever seen—and they did it in only one year. Today, the teachers believe they built well. So do I.

### **7. Student learning objectives shall be assigned to specific marking periods and tested with district tests at the ends of those marking periods.**

This is a double policy. Both parts are reversed in most public schools. Teachers are usually free to schedule the objectives within the year, and teachers are usually free to test them with their own tests whenever they wish during the year. The strongest argument *against* a district-imposed schedule is that there is no one perfect schedule—there are 17 different

equally effective schedules. Granted. The strongest argument *in favor* of a district-imposed schedule is that since those 17 schedules are equally effective, one should be chosen because choosing one—any one of the 17—gives powerful leverage in raising student achievement. There are several kinds of leverage:

- Students can be given the learning schedule in September.

- Parents can be given it in September.

- Principals can be given it in September.

- The superintendent can be given it in September.

The advantages to each are probably apparent.

Take the superintendent, for instance, since he or she is in a position to help all parties. By creating district tests (written by teachers to match the objectives) and having them administered on the learning schedule at the end of every marking period, the superintendent can provide several kinds of useful information to the parties. Individual students can see how well they are doing. So can their teachers, who can also tell how well learning is proceeding in the entire classroom. So can their principals, who can also tell how well learning is proceeding in the entire school. So can the superintendent, who can also tell how well learning is proceeding in the entire school district. So can the board of education.

You can see how useful it is for all of these interested parties to know so much so soon. No need to wait until June for the good news. Or the bad. Give the news to everybody early enough to help. The effect of this news is so powerful that you can virtually predict the behavior of all parties when they get it. That behavior is what

raises student achievement. Incidentally, teachers who feel that this policy requires too much testing should be left free to administer fewer tests of their own and substitute the district test results.

The Savannah, Georgia, board shifted to this policy in 1983-84 to help its 45 principals keep their promises to raise student achievement. It worked just as predicted.

### **8. National achievement tests shall be administered in every grade every year.**

Few public schools follow this policy. Most use such tests only in occasional grades, usually stopping short of the high school. They offer various arguments for that policy, to which I offer the following counter-arguments:

- They don't fit our curriculum, anyway.

*If no national test fits your curriculum, you must know something the other schools don't. Or vice versa.*

- They cost too much.

*About \$2 per student out of the \$2000 you are spending*

- They take too much time from teaching.

*About one day out of your 180 days.*

- They test low-level cognition.

*So do the teacher-made tests you use for grading and promotion.*

- They are not valid.

*They are more valid than the teacher-made tests you use for grading and promotion.*

- They are not reliable.

*They are far more reliable than the teacher-made tests you use for grading and promotion.*

- Testing occasional grades tells us whether we are on the track.

*It does not tell where you ran off.*

- Our high school curriculum is too diverse to measure with a national test.

*Maybe it is so diverse it does not teach your students to read, write, and do mathematics, science, and social studies as well as others in the nation. Better find out.*

- National norm-referenced tests cannot pinpoint local program strengths and weaknesses.

*Take another testing course—or read Jim Popbam more carefully.*

The Valley View, Illinois, board of education thought the usual arguments were not good enough, so it adopted the policy for grades 1 through 8 in 1978. The Aurora, Colorado, board did the same thing for grades 1 through 11. Both of them use the annual results to diagnose as well as to judge the curriculum. Partly but not entirely because of this policy change, achievement test scores in both places have gone up every year since. I suspect student learning has done the same thing.

### **9. Individual intelligence tests shall be administered to a random sample of students in each grade every three years.**

Not group tests—too many people argue about the results. This policy requires *individual* tests, the best devices we have for measuring ability, not perfect, but better than any alternative. And I do not mean tests for just the extreme kids like the handicapped and the gifted, the ones who usually get the individual intelligence tests, but tests for a sample of all kids.

No public schools follow this policy, so far as I know. Curious. So many people in so many schools spend so much time telling each other how much or how little the students are capable of learning that you would think they would want the best possible evidence on the subject. Come to think of it, I do not know any topic as important—except desegregation—

where so much opinion thrives on so little proof.

The Valley View, Illinois, board had to confront this problem directly because its students, who were not learning much, could not learn any more—or so everybody said. In fact, they were getting dumber every year—an annual incremental developmental disability, the psychologists called it—as they moved up the grades. The teachers learned about it from each other. Moreover, the district had the paper and pencil ability test scores to prove it. The lower their ability test scores in each succeeding grade, the lower their achievement test scores. Clearly, there was no hope for any improvement. Indeed, pressuring the children to improve would probably have caused nervous breakdowns—or whatever children have when they learn more than they should.

It was the high correlation between the ability test and the achievement test that made me first suspect that the test publisher had given birth to Siamese twins. We needed another ability test—not a group test, not a paper and pencil test, and not a test by the same publisher. The schools selected the WISC-R, brought in an outside team of psychologists, tested a random cross section of students in every grade, analyzed the results, and discovered they were above the national average in every grade. Using the results as a kind of skyhook to pull up its expectations over the next several years, the district lifted student achievement above the national average—reaching the 80th percentile or better in the lower grades and the 60th or better in the upper grades. Oh, yes—about those paper and pencil ability test scores. Every time achievement test scores rose, the ability test scores followed right along with them, just like any Siamese twin.

Valley View did it only once—not every three years. But if it adopted the policy I am recommending, it would probably learn that its students are getting smarter every year. The psychologists could call it annual incremental developmental ability. And encouraged by a label like that, the board of education could raise its expectations again.

**10. Intellectual development shall be the primary responsibility of the schools; character development shall be treated as primarily the responsibility of the community.**

We asked about 10,000 people whether there is any difference between the work of the public schools and the work of the community in educating students. We did not ask one group. We asked residents, teachers, high school students, and recent graduates. We did not ask one time. We asked 277 times—once for each one of 277 different things students might be taught to know, feel, or be able to do. Should that particular thing be taught by the public schools or by home, church, and community? We did not ask in one place. We asked in Seattle and Indian Prairie and Toledo and Brown Deer and Tacoma and Burnt Hills and Jackson and Hadley-Luzerne. We did not ask in one year. We asked in 1980 and 1981 and 1982 and 1983 and 1984.

By now, the answer pattern is entirely clear. Character development is important. Students ought to learn things like these:

- Has values that guide his or her actions.
- Respects different values held by others.
- Accepts responsibility for his or her own behavior.
- Shows pride in his or her work.
- Respects the rights and property of others.

- Compromises with others to settle disagreements.

But teaching those things is not the primary responsibility of the public schools. All the populations in all the places agreed about that all of the times. Character development is the primary "curriculum for the community." The schools can help—but not at the expense of doing their own primary job.

Intellectual development is the primary responsibility of the schools. It is important for students to learn things like:

- Computes accurately (adds, subtracts, multiplies, and divides).
- Reads with understanding.
- Writes correctly (proper grammar, punctuation, and capitalization).
- Speaks correctly.
- Spells correctly.
- Knows American history.

Teaching those things is the primary responsibility of the public schools. All the populations in all the places agreed about that all of the times. The community can help, but it cannot be blamed if students do not know what they should and do not think as they should.

If all the people in all the places agree all of the times about that, the policy would be not only reasonable, but also popular. It would make the schools seem clear-headed and purposeful, able to set clear goals and judge the results. A lot of people—residents, teachers, students, and recent graduates—think their schools are the opposite.

If your board is not sure how to divide the work of the schools from the work of the community, the National School Boards Association can supply that list of 277 things so you can find out.

Or you could just adopt the policy. □

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